

J. David Velleman, On Being Me: A Personal Invitation to Philosophy

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Book Review

J. David Velleman, On Being Me: A Personal Invitation to Philosophy, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2020, xiii + 91 pp.

David Velleman's short and engaging invitation to philosophy consists of, as he describes it, "dispatches from an examined life" (xiii): concise and subjective reports about the nature of personhood, or, rather, about what it is like to be me. These reports are organized in seven chapters, which are nicely illustrated with drawings made by Emily C. Bernstein.

The first chapter, "Being Glad I Was Born," has ten sentences, one page, one drawing, and a meaningful thought about coming to exist being a chancy event, which seems as something that does not bother Velleman much, as opposed to the possibility of not going on existing. He leaves it as such, as he moves on to the second chapter, "Wanting to Go On," where he discusses what is usually called the problem of personal identity over time. As he exists, he wants to continue, but not as a soul or a thing. He wants to continue as a subject of experiences, thoughts and feelings. He wants to be able to refer to his *I* in any passing moment without being obliged to assume that it is this very person, David Velleman, who is continuing to exist. The personal pronoun "I" is as it were a hook which is being casted forwards and backwards in time thanks to memory and anticipation according to which persons organize their existence.

The cornerstone of the third chapter, "Fearing the End," is the experience of passing. Is our experience of the passage of time real? Velleman thinks it is not; rather than moving in time, he is extended in it. Thus, it is different segments, rather than the whole of him that occupies different days in his life, in a way in which the string of cars make up a train. "So the end of me is not a cliff toward which I am constantly hurtling; it's merely a segment of me with nothing beyond it in time, just as there is nothing of me above the crown of my head or below the soles of my feet" (34). This does not mean, however, that he does not mind having an endpoint, or final segment, in time: after all, the meaning and value of his present experience consists in desires and emotions about the future and the past.

What might have been if he had chosen ballet career instead of career in philosophy is in the focus of the fourth chapter, "Regretting What Might Have Been." Velleman draws attention to different kinds of regret that are connected to omitted possibilities and asks whether the person who would have chosen a different life path would be him. His answer is negative: the

ballet career could not have been *his* past. “There is no point in comparing my story with other stories that, as of now, couldn’t have been mine” (43); consequently, there is no point in regretting for what he might have been if he had made a different choice in the past.

The fifth chapter, “Aspiring to Authorship,” and the sixth chapter, “Making Things Happen,” address the issues of agency and free will. Velleman is considering whether determinism is a threat to personal identity and responsibility, and argues that his choices, desires and deeds are the result of his authorship and self-reflection. “Certified authorship” as a consequence of self-reflection is a key element of responsibility, with which he can “surprise even God” (45). The last chapter, “Wanting to Be Loved,” goes further in declaring the value of introspection. The introspection by itself is not enough: he wants to be loved by others. Yet he wants to be loved for *being him*—not for being David Velleman or for having particular qualities or accomplishments, but for his deepest self that he meets and greets in silence, that has motives, does things, knows what it will do, and that is present throughout all changes.

The nature of Velleman’s reports make the book readable, although the effort to riddle out the implications is solely the task of the reader. That task is imposed by the author’s ability to say more with fewer words, as well as by his personal style, which makes an impression that he is writing as he is thinking along the way. The good thing is that he is using an ordinary language while presenting a variety of difficult issues concerning personhood. The bad thing is that ordinary language is being used as a perfect cover for arguments in disguise. “There are no arguments,” says Velleman in the “Preface” (xii); yet, the book is organized as a philosophical stream of consciousness, or a stream of consciousness by a philosopher, so that the sense of arguments lurking behind what are supposed to be personal explorations is inevitable (especially for readers acquainted with Velleman’s writings). The motive for writing an invitation to philosophy in this fashion is observable if we take a closer look at the “Preface,” and connect it with the author’s scattered comments throughout the book. Velleman says that he realized that in his lengthy career, which has lasted for forty years, he was striving to make his arguments convincing. Now, he has written a philosophical book which is less convincing and more personal. As he points out, even though his personal side was always present in his arguments, it was there in the impersonal tone. “Most of these observations and speculations have appeared in my academic publications, sometimes supported by more or less formal arguments. For many years I thought the arguments were meant to convince the reader, but then I found myself oddly unconcerned when few if any were readers convinced. I finally realized that I have all along been reporting on personal explorations, composing dispatches from an examined life” (12–13). I would not say that this book is a career retrospective; however, there is some appeal to it. Velleman writes about what he was thinking about and what he was professionally doing for the last four decades in a more leisurely manner than he used to do throughout his career.

Velleman conceives of his book as an invitation to philosophy. Even though it does not have “*répondez s’il vous plaît*” included, the reader is

supposed either to accept the invitation or to reject it. As with other kinds of invitation, the response will depend, among other things, on expectations. Those who expect an easy to follow introduction to philosophy will remain unsatisfied. Being a person is, as Velleman notes, “a convoluted sort of thing to be” (p. xi), and some parts of the book are perhaps too difficult to follow for a beginner, who is, I assume, the principal recipient of the invitation. Besides, some of the thoughts developed in the book will be more easily understood by those who are already familiar with Velleman’s views on the topics discussed here. For these reasons, some will probably waver about accepting the invitation.¹

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